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The Daitou Ryu Aiki Jujutsu Legacy of SAGAWA Yukiyoshi:

*** * * Part 1: Interview with Master TAKAHASHI Masaru * * ***

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How to Follow in the Footsteps of Genius: The Challenge for “The Rest of Us”

The connection between AIKI (internal power) and physical training

Q: *Physical training, which normally involves cultivating muscles and bodily strength, seems on its face to absolutely contradict the image of Sagawa sensei’s AIKI as a kind of internal power entirely independent of any reliance on physical strength whatsoever. Given this apparent contradiction, may we ask your view on what really is the link between AIKI and physical training?*

A: Sagawa sensei constantly exhorted us to do more physical training. That was due to his insistence on developing power as a prerequisite for mastery. However, Sagawa sensei’s ability was not based on use of physical strength per se. One purpose of the physical training was to develop the capability for every discrete part of the body to emit what Sagawa sensei called “concentrated AIKI power”. That ability in turn relied on the overall condition of the body, as a whole. For example, to emit power from the arms requires that the entire body stand in a strong upright posture. Basically, he taught that your body’s core area and trunk had to be strengthened and firmed up. To accomplish that, we had to strengthen our waist and hip area, which in turn supports the trunk and core, and by extension, the entire body. But then you understand that the waist and hips are supported by the legs. Generally, Sagawa sensei taught that all the body’s muscles, tissues, and bones needed to be conditioned and strengthened.

Traditional Japanese culture has always emphasised training of the belly or “hara”, also sometimes called the “lower tanden”. This point has been regarded as the body’s center of gravity and balance. Sagawa sensei also often told us “You must concentrate power into your lower belly”.

The point of that teaching was to emphasize the need for strong waist, abdomen, hips and legs to support the upper body. He most certainly was not teaching us to stiffen up the whole body with physical tension. Additionally, I believe that Sagawa sensei was able to use his own physically conditioned body as a kind of sensor or probe that allowed him to understand the inner state of an opponent’s body. By projecting his understanding of his own weak points onto an opponent, he was able to grasp how to use the opponent’s own weaknesses against him. Thus he could very efficiently apply just a small amount of power to accomplish a very effective attack. If the opponent is very strong, you shouldn’t oppose his power directly. In such a case the important thing is to use the barest minimum of power in probing for the most efficient way to handle him. Even if somebody comes at you with 100 units of power, in the beginning you should try to use only 10 relative units of power to handle his attack. The final goal is to reduce the physical power of your response even further, from ten units down to five, and finally becoming able to totally collapse him with just three. You have to train with that in mind. Holding that as your goal is the

prerequisite, and the physical training is done to augment your strength in support of this kind of work.

Q: Takahashi sensei, I believe that you first entered into training under Sagawa sensei in the hope of mastering his special principle of AIKI, but at what point did you first realize that Sagawa sensei emphasized basic physical training to such a great degree?

A: Sagawa sensei continually admonished all students that they must engage in basic physical training, so I was made aware of its importance as soon as I joined the dojo, right from the start. However, I joined the dojo on May 5th of 1972, and on May 27th when I impudently asked Sagawa sensei: “Exactly what kind of physical training should I do?”, he answered “That’s something I’m not going to teach you here. Ever since I was young I’ve come up with a lot of special training methods, all developed completely on my own.” At the time I thought, “How can that be?” But later after getting more familiar with the system, I realized that indeed, Sagawa sensei never learned any special physical training regimen from his own teacher, TAKEDA Sokaku. Sagawa sensei saw no more than two types of solo training practiced by Takeda sensei. Takeda sensei hadn’t undergone any particular training regimen. One of the only two methods of Takeda sensei’s that Sagawa sensei was able to catch a glimpse of was his use of a wooden training sword to strike a bundle of sticks that he hung by a string from the ceiling. Sagawa sensei saw that when Takeda sensei, in his wanderings, stayed for a time with Sagawa sensei’s family. Apart from that, Takeda sensei was also seen to perform daily exercises to develop his wrists and grip strength. Sagawa sensei never asked about the details of these, but from various little hints he naturally picked up the basic idea using his own imagination.

I also wanted to engage in this kind of training, but being a person of strictly average intelligence, whenever I began this kind of training I was plagued by doubts, thinking “Is this the right way? Or should I be doing it differently, or what?” But out of that I worked up a training regimen that suited me.

Takeda sensei’s method for strengthening the legs and hips

Q: So you would say that by observing Takeda sensei’s combative techniques, and pondering how to execute them with the greatest possible efficiency, and further by considering how to integrate the concept of AIKI, Sagawa sensei came up with a variety of his own training methods?

A: Yes, and in particular there was one area, the legs and hips, which Takeda sensei didn’t seem particularly interested in training,, but which Sagawa sensei targeted for special attention in his own training method. According to Sagawa sensei, no matter how strongly an opponent tried to grip and restrain Takeda sensei’s arms, Takeda sensei would instantly slip to the inside and easily lift the opponent bodily onto his own shoulders. This capability was explored by Sagawa sensei in his own training under the name of “whole body AIKI”, which he later succeeded in replicating. But he also had to consider the physical training requirements for this kind of technique. One surviving photograph of Takeda sensei taken in his later years shows an elderly Takeda sensei with a training partner hoisted entirely up on his shoulders. Doing that at his age would require a really strong physical framework. You couldn’t tell from his outer appearance though. By thinking through the implications of all this, Sagawa sensei came up with his own unique training system.

Unfortunately however, in Takeda sensei's later years his legs weakened somewhat. Observing that only reinforced Sagawa sensei's resolve to particularly emphasize lower-body training. Later on, people heard about Sagawa sensei's training with things like staff swinging and push-ups, so everybody focused on those kinds of things, but Sagawa sensei himself most often talked about lower-body strengthening and training the legs and hips.

Doing more with age

Those of us who joined the dojo and met Sagawa sensei in his 70's or 80's heard that he trained thousands of daily repetitions of drills such as thrusting, turning, staff swining and so on. Later after Sagawa sensei's passing, it was learned (from his notes and diaries found in storage and organized by the students) that he'd kept daily physical training logs. According to those records, in his thirties he wasn't doing thousands of reps, he'd started with dozens or hundreds at that time. I only realized that a bit too late, otherwise maybe I'd have started off easy too ... *(laughs)*

Q: So, what do you think about a very high number of repetitions of the various drills?

A: I used to have a joke with a dojomate that since Sagawa sensei always did one thousand reps in a single set, that we should just have a new unit "one Sagawa" to call out one thousand reps of anything. *(laughs)* For somebody like me, a laggard when it comes to physical training, that was really hard to understand. He would choose most of his inventory of 20 or so drill types to perform on any given day, but he'd wrap it up in just a few hours every morning. That kind of time efficiency was really a puzzle to all of us. Sometimes he would show us his training records and drill counts, and then after he died we found more diaries showing that every single day, as long as circumstances permitted even into his last years he was doing thousands of reps of these drills every day. Even in his eighties it was the same. How he was able to do all that in such a short time every day is really one of the big mysteries of Sagawa sensei's training method.

Q: It seems that, if we assume it took one second per rep of any given drill, then by straightforward calculation it would take just over two hours to do everything...

A: Well, sometimes he'd write "Couldn't finish everything this morning, so I continued into the afternoon". Actually, sometimes I feel like challenging myself with staff swinging, but I can never finish in less than an hour. It's embarrassing, really frustrating. *(laughs)* And then handling the staff that much would raise blisters on my palms. which in my trade as a moxibustionist can be a bit unpleasant. Maybe I'm being a bit naughty in saying that.

Anyway, even though Sagawa sensei swung the staff one thousand times every single morning, his hands had no calluses at all. For that matter, it seems that Takeda sensei's hands were just the same. When Sagawa sensei was in his seventies and met with TAKEDA Tokimune (son of Takeda Sokaku) and Takeda said that Sagawa sensei's hands had become exactly the same as his father's. That seems to be another of the mysteries of Sagawa sensei's training method.

Q: What was it really like to be gripped by Sagawa sensei during practice?

A: It didn't feel at all rough. His hands actually felt very soft. And that's why he was so effective. When an opponent is handled roughly, he can perceive that from the first touch, and naturally reacts with an instantaneous self-protective instinctive motion. A soft touch, however, is really effective. I think that's the most important thing.

Ongoing training legacy of the Sagawa dojo

At the Sagawa dojo, people work on the various training drills such as *shiko* (Sumo leg raise and stomp), turning, staff swinging, etc. according to their individual needs. The most senior instructor there, TAGUCHI Tetsuya, strictly adheres to the teachings of Sagawa sensei. I really have to salute him for that. He is a school teacher, and whenever he walks with anything in his cloth sling, no matter how heavy it may be, he always just carries it with his pinky finger alone. And on the train he always supports himself by holding the hanging strap with just his pinky also. Actually, apart from me, all the old students likewise. Sagawa sensei most appreciated the students who did the hardest physical training. When Mr. Sakuma trained, his arms seemed to thicken right before our eyes. Sagawa sensei really liked that and so he promoted Mr. Sakuma especially quickly.

Anyway, Sagawa sensei always told us that persistence is the most difficult thing. Somebody lazy like me just can't keep up with it, and that's really bad. (*laughs*) I'm kind of a sluggard when it comes to that kind of training, but just because I'm a laggard, I tried doubly hard not to let anything slip by me, to really understand what Sagawa sensei was trying to convey to us. I really pondered what was the essential point he was trying to get across to us. Maybe that's another of my faults, just looking for the easiest and most effective way to accomplish everything.

Q: Nevertheless, it's due to your cooperation that we can get this glimpse into Sagawa sensei's training methods, which he didn't teach openly and which were largely unknown to anybody else, during his lifetime.

A: Even if we aren't geniuses like Sagawa sensei, we should still do our best within our own more limited scope. If all of us regular non-genius folks combine our small talents and mutually cooperate, we may approach some understanding of the accomplishments of a singular genius like Sagawa-sensei. Whereas if we take up the idea that "Only Sagawa sensei himself, because he was a unique genius, could possibly master the AIKI principle" then it's totally pointless for anybody else to even bother practicing Daito Ryu martial arts at all. Even though Sagawa sensei's level of skill will always remain far beyond our grasp, still I believe that we can find our own way to understand, work with, and express the basic teachings and methods left to us by him. While keeping a respectful eye upwards to Sagawa sensei's sublime example, anybody can accomplish something at their own pace and in their own way. That is what all of us who had the great good fortune to learn from him would wish.